

January 27, 2010 - White House Must Change Direction, Murtha Says

Pittsburgh Tribune-Review

www.pittsburghlive.com

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PITTSBURGH
TRIBUNE-REVIEW

Wednesday, January 27, 2010

WASHINGTON -- Voters sent Democrats a message by handing Republicans victories in elections from Massachusetts to Virginia, and President Obama needs to tell the nation tonight he heard that message, U.S. Rep. John Murtha said.

Murtha, D-Johnstown, said Obama should tell the country:
"We're going to back off the big, overall picture. We're going to try to come up with a (health care) program we can pass, and everybody's going to participate."

Murtha, who has served through eight presidential administrations, has seen this before.

"I remember a lot of presidents saying one thing (and) then they turned around and did another," he said, citing Ronald Reagan's

unfulfilled promise of balancing the budget.

"They don't ever change their rhetoric, but they do change their direction. And I think you'll see a change in direction" from Obama, Murtha said. "There has to be. They can't continue, because they don't have the votes."

House and Senate Democrats are at loggerheads over their respective versions of a health care overhaul. House leaders say the chamber cannot pass a bill without a public insurance option, among other provisions. Senate leaders, who must contend with a 59-vote majority that no longer can override Republican filibusters, say they can't pass a bill with such provisions.

Democrats lost their 60-vote filibuster-proof majority -- attained with Sen. Arlen Specter's party switch in April -- when Massachusetts Republican Scott Brown last week defeated Democrat Martha Coakley to fill the late Sen. Edward Kennedy's unexpired term. Republicans have vowed to filibuster the Senate bill.

Something has to be done, Murtha said. "Health care needs to be reformed. It's too expensive."

Support is building for separate bills, beginning with laws for which there's broad support, such as banning insurance companies from denying coverage based on pre-existing conditions.

"I predict that's what's going to happen," Murtha said.

Some economists and advocates of a health care overhaul say the process can't be tackled piecemeal, however. If insurance companies must insure anyone who applies, people might not pay for insurance until they get sick. Opponents to the incremental approach liken it to someone buying car insurance after a wreck.

Another option would be to merge the bills, said Rep. John Larson, D-Conn. A committee would reconcile House and Senate differences and seek an up-or-down vote from each chamber. Bills passed through reconciliation are not subject to filibuster.

Murtha believes that, too, presents a risk for Obama. Presidents derive power from perception and popularity, he said.

A Gallup poll released Friday showed 55 percent of people think Congress should suspend work on the existing bills and seek alternatives Republicans can support. Thirty-nine percent of those polled favor pushing forward with existing legislation.

"Presidents have a way of using up their popularity," Murtha said. "If (Obama) doesn't change," he risks the same.

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